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SUCCESS STORY: RWANDA

Rwanda's First Recipient of U.S. Government ARVs: A Life Transformed

In 2005, 15,900 people were treated with ARVs provided by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief to Rwanda's HIV/AIDS treatment program.



Eleda Mukamurara

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Source: S. Mountzis

When Eleda Mukamurara arrives at Biryogo Community Clinic, she is greeted like an old friend by the staff. In 2003, she became the first patient in Rwanda treated with antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) with U.S. Government assistance, and she is proud to be a representative for all the progress Rwanda and Rwandans have made in the fight against HIV.

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In 2003, this was not the case. Eleda weighed just 37 kg (81 lb) and needed a stick to walk. She was lonely, having lost her husband four years earlier to an undiagnosed illness. She was battling tuberculosis. When she discovered that she was infected with HIV, she shared the news with her family and neighbors. The neighbors rejected her and refused to allow their children to play with her eight children. Her brother accused her of being a prostitute. She was plagued by a recurring nightmare about her own death. She would wake up terrified about her children's future.

Through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, USAID supports training for the nurses at Biryogo Community Clinic who care for patients on ARVs. Eleda saw a nurse at the clinic every day for the first six weeks of her triple combination ARV therapy. She was encouraged to bring a friend with her. At the beginning, this was a member of the clinic. These daily visits helped Eleda adjust to the discipline of taking the ARVs daily. They also provided vital emotional support. A social worker came to her home on a number of occasions to see how the rest of her family was coping. After six weeks, Eleda started visiting the clinic once a week. Within six months she was showing marked improvement.

Eleda belongs to an association of people living with HIV/AIDS where she receives a food ration. The meetings provide a good opportunity for members to support one another. For both the clinic and the association, Eleda talks to people who have recently found out they are HIV-positive: "I tell them, 'Look at me! I am well. Don't worry, you can be healthy and carry on with your lives.'"

Eleda has seen a big change in HIV awareness since 2003.

Today, she says, everybody knows how HIV is transmitted, and people talk freely about their HIV status. Her neighbors are once again her friends, and she has rebuilt her relationship with her brother. “Now we share the same plate to eat, and he greets me the way a brother should,” she remarked. Eleda’s laugh is infectious, and she enjoys describing the transformation of her life since starting ARVs. Her nightmares have gone away and treatment has enabled Eleda to continue caring for her eight children. Life is still a struggle, because she is very poor. Now that she is healthy, she is able to make some money washing and ironing clothes.

Biryogo Clinic is considered a model for community health care in Rwanda. The thorough follow-up provided by the nurses has resulted in very good adherence to treatment - more than 90 percent of patients follow the regimen successfully. The nurses and doctor also offer in-house training for other health workers. The workers usually come and work at the clinic for two or three weeks and then return to their health centers with new knowledge and skills to care for ARV patients.

March 2006